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Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity

Q: You suggest in your work that sexual liberation is not so much the uncovering of secret truths about one's self or one's desire as it is a part of the process of defining and constructing desire. What are the practical implications of this distinction?

MF: What I meant was that I think what the gay movement needs now is much more the art of life than a science or scientific knowledge (or pseudo-scientific knowledge) of what sexuality is. Sexuality is a part of our behavior. It's a part of our world freedom. Sexuality is something that we ourselves create—it is our own creation, and much more than the discovery of a secret side of our desire. We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it's a possibility for creative life.

Q: That's basically what you're getting at when you suggest that we should try to become gay—not just to reassert ourselves as gay.

MF: Yes, that's it. We don't have to discover that we are homosexuals.

Q: Or what the meaning of that is?

MF: Exactly. Rather, we have to create a gay life. To *become*.

Q: And this is something without limits?

MF: Yes, sure, I think when you look at the different ways people have experienced their own sexual freedoms—the way they have created their works of art—you would have to say that sexuality, as we now know it, has become one of the most creative sources of our society and our being. My view is that we should understand it in the reverse way: the world [regards] sexuality as the secret of the creative cultural life; it is rather a process of our having to create a

new cultural life underneath the ground of our sexual choices.

Q: Practically speaking, one of the effects of trying to uncover that secret has meant that the gay movement has remained at the level of demanding civil or human rights around sexuality. That is, sexual liberation has remained at the level of demanding sexual tolerance.

MF: Yes, but this aspect must be supported. It is important, first, to have the possibility—and the right—to choose your own sexuality. Human rights regarding sexuality are important and are still not respected in many places. We shouldn't consider that such problems are solved now. It's quite true that there was a real liberation process in the early '70s. This process was very good, both in terms of the situation and in terms of opinions, but the situation has not definitely stabilized. Still, I think we have to go a step further. I think that one of the factors of this stabilization will be the creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships in society, art, culture and so on, through our sexual, ethical and political choices. Not only do we have to defend ourselves, not only affirm ourselves as an identity but as a creative force.

Q: A lot of that sounds like what, for instance, the women's movement has done, trying to establish their own language and their own culture.

MF: Well, I'm not sure that we have to create our *own* culture. We have to *create* culture. We have to realize cultural creations. But in doing so, we come up against the problem of identity. I don't know what we would do to form these creations, and I don't know what forms these creations would take. For instance, I am not at all sure that the best form of literary creations by gay people is gay novels.

Q: In fact, we would not even want to say that. That would be based on an essentialism that we need to avoid.

MF: True. What do we mean for instance, by "gay painting"? Yet, I am sure that from the point of departure of our ethical choices, we can create something that will have a certain relationship to gayness. But it must not be a translation of gayness in the field of music or painting or what have you, for I do not think this can happen.

Q: How do you view the enormous proliferation in the last 10 or 15 years of male homosexual practices: the sensualization, if you like, of neglected parts of the body and the articulation of new pleasures? I am thinking, obviously, of the salient aspects of what we call the ghetto—porn movies, clubs for S/M or fistfucking, and so forth. Is this merely an extension into another sphere of the general proliferation of sexual discourses since the 19th century, or do you see other kinds of developments that are peculiar to this present historical context?

MF: Well, I think what we want to speak about is precisely the *innovations* that those practices imply. For instance, look at the S/M subculture, as our good friend Gayle Rubin would insist. I don't think that this movement of sexual practices has anything to do with the disclosure or the uncovering of S/M tendencies deep within our unconscious, and so on. I think that S/M is much more than that; it's the real creation of new possibilities of pleasure, which people had no idea about previously. The idea that S/M is related to a deep violence, that S/M practice is a way of liberating this violence, this aggression, is stupid. We know very well what all those people are doing is not aggressive; they are inventing new possibilities of pleasure with strange parts of their body—through the eroticization of the body. I think it's a kind of creation, a creative enterprise, which has as one of its main features what I call the desexualization of pleasure. The idea that bodily pleasure should always come from sexual pleasure is the root of *all* our possible pleasure. I think *that's* something quite wrong. These practices are insisting that we can produce pleasure with very odd things, very strange parts of our bodies, in very unusual situations, and so on.

Q: So the conflation of pleasure and sex is being broken down.

MF: That's it precisely. The possibility of using our bodies as a possible source of very numerous pleasures is something that is very important. For instance, if you look at the traditional construction of pleasure, you see that bodily pleasure, or pleasures of the flesh, are always drinking, eating and fucking. And that seems to be the limit of the understanding of our body, our pleasures. What frustrates me, for instance, is the fact that the problem of drugs is always envisaged only as a problem of freedom and prohibition. I think that drugs must become a part of our culture.

Q: As a pleasure?

MF: As a pleasure. We have to study drugs. We have to experience drugs. We have to do *good* drugs, which can produce very intense pleasure. I think this puritanism about drugs, which implies that you can either be for drugs or against drugs, is mistaken. Drugs have now become a part of our culture. Just as there is bad music and good music, there are bad drugs and good drugs. So we can't say we are "against" drugs any more than we can say we're "against" music.

Q: The point is to experiment with pleasure and its possibilities.

MF: Yes. Pleasure also must be a part of our culture. It is very interesting to note, for instance, that for centuries people generally, as well as doctors, psychiatrists and even liberation movements, have always spoken about desire, and never about pleasure. "We have to liberate our desire," they say. No! We have to create new pleasure. And then maybe desire will follow.

Q: Is it significant that there are, to a large degree, identities forming around new sexual practices, like S/M? These identities help in exploring such practices and defending the right to engage in them. But are they also limiting in regards to the possibilities of individuals?

MF: Well, if identity is only a game, if it is only a procedure to have relations, social and sexual–pleasure relationships that create new friendships, it is useful. But if identity becomes the problem of sexual existence, and if people think that they have to "uncover" their "own identity," and that their own identity has to become the law, the principle, the code of their existence; if the perennial question they ask is "Does this thing conform to my identity?" then, I think, they will turn back to a kind of ethics very close to the old heterosexual virility. If we are asked to relate to the question of identity, it has to be an identity to our unique selves. But the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. To be the same is really boring. We must not exclude identity if people find their pleasure through this identity, but we must not think of this identity as an ethical universal rule.

Q: But up to this point, sexual identity has been politically very useful.

MF: Yes, it has been very useful, but it limits us and I think we have (and can have) a right to be free.

Q: We want some of our sexual practices to be ones of resistance in a political and social sense. Yet, how is this possible, given that control can be exercised by the stimulation of pleasure? Can we be sure that these new pleasures won't be exploited in the way advertising uses the stimulation of pleasure as a means of social control?

MF: We can never be sure. In fact, we can always be sure *it will happen*, and that everything that has been created or acquired, any ground that has been gained will, at a certain moment be used in such a way. That's the way we live, that's the way we struggle, that's the way of human history. And I don't think that is an objection to all those movements or all those situations. But you are quite right in underlining that we always have to be quite careful and to be aware of the fact that we have to move on to something else, that we have other needs as well. The S/M ghetto in San Francisco is a good example of a community that has experimented with, and formed an identity around, pleasure. This ghettoization, this identification, this procedure of exclusion and so on—all of these have, as well, produced their countereffects. I dare not use the word *dialectics*—but this comes rather close to it.

Q: You write that power is not just a negative force but a productive one; that power is always there; that where there is power, there is resistance and

that resistance is never in a position of externality vis-à-vis power. If this is so, then how do we come to any other conclusion than that we are always trapped inside that relationship—that we can't somehow break out of it.

MF: Well I don't think the work *trapped* is a correct one. It is a struggle, but what I mean by power relations is the fact that we are in a strategic situation towards each other. For instance, being homosexuals we are in a struggle with the government, and the government is in a struggle with us. When we deal with the government, the struggle, of course, is not symmetrical, the power situation is not the same, but we are in this struggle, and the continuation of this situation can influence the behavior or nonbehavior of the other. So we are not trapped. We are always in this kind of situation. It means that we always have possibilities, there are always possibilities of changing the situation. We cannot jump *outside* the situation, and there is no point where you are free from all power relations. But you can always change it. So what I've said does not mean that we are always trapped, but that we are always free. Well anyway, that there is always the possibility of changing.

Q: So resistance comes from within that dynamic?

MF: Yes. You see, if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience. You have to use power relations to refer to the situation where you're not doing what you want. So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that *resistance* is the main word, *the key word*, in this dynamic.

Q: Politically speaking, probably the most important part of looking at power is that according to previous conceptions, "to resist" was simply to say no. Resistance was conceptualized only in terms of negation. Within your understanding, however, to resist is not simply a negation, but a creative process; to create and recreate, to change the situation, actually to be an active member of that process.

MF: Yes, that is the way I would put it. To say no is the minimum form of resistance. But of course, at times that is very important. You have to say no as a decisive form of resistance.

Q: This raises the question of in what way, and to what degree, can a dominated subject (or subjectivity) actually create its own discourse. In traditional power analysis, the omnipresent feature of analysis is the dominant discourse and only as a subsidiary are there reactions to, or within, that discourse. However, if what we mean by resistance in power relations is more than negation, then aren't some practices like, say, lesbian S/M, actually ways for dominated subjects to formulate their own languages?

MF: Well, you see, I think that resistance is a part of this strategic relationship of which power consists. Resistance really always relies upon the situation against which it struggles. For instance, in the gay movement the medical definition of homosexuality was a very important tool against the oppression of homosexuality in the last part of the 19th century and in the early 20th century. This medicalization, which was a means of oppression, has always been a means of resistance as well—since people could say, "If we are sick, then why do you condemn us, why do you despise us?" and so on. Of course, this discourse now sounds rather naïve to us, but at the time it was very important.

I should say, also, that I think that in the lesbian movement, the fact that women have been, for centuries and centuries, isolated in society, frustrated, despised in many ways and so on, has given them the real possibility of constituting a society, of creating a kind of social relation between themselves, outside the social world that was dominated by males. Lillian Faderman's book, *Surpassing the Love of Men,* is very interesting in this regard. It raises the question: what kind of emotional experience, what kind of relationships, were possible in a world where women in society had no social, no legal and no political power? And she argues that women used that isolation and lack of power.

Q: If resistance is a process of breaking out of discursive practices, it would seem that the case that has a prima facie claim to be truly oppositional might be something like lesbian S/M. To what degree can such practices and identities be seen as challenging the dominant discourse?

MF: What I think is interesting now in relation to lesbian S/M is that they can get rid of certain stereotypes of femininity that have been used in the lesbian movement; a strategy that the movement has erected from the past. This strategy has been based on their oppression. But now, maybe, these tools, these weapons are obsolete. We can see that lesbian S/M tried to get rid of all those old stereotypes of femininity, of antimale attitude and so on.

Q: What do you think we can learn about power, and for that matter about pleasure from the practice of S/M—that is, the explicit eroticization of power?

MF: One can say that S/M is the eroticization of power, the eroticization of strategic relations. What strikes me with regard to S/M is how it differs from social power. What characterized power is the fact that it is a strategic relation that has been stabilized through institutions. So the mobility in power relations is limited, and there are strongholds that are very, very difficult to suppress because they have been institutionalized and are now very pervasive in courts, codes and so on. All that means that the strategic relations of people are made rigid.

On this point, the S/M game is very interesting because it is a strategic relation, but it is always fluid. Of course, there are roles but everybody knows very well that those roles can be reversed. Sometimes the scene begins with the

master and slave, and at the end the slave has become the master. Or, even when the roles are stabilized, you know very well that it is always a game. Either the rules are transgressed, or there is an agreement, either explicit or tacit, that makes them aware of certain boundaries. This strategic game as a source of bodily pleasure is very interesting. But I wouldn't say that it is a reproduction, inside the erotic relationship, of the structures of power. It is an acting out of power structures by a strategic game that is able to give sexual pleasure or bodily pleasure.

Q: How does this strategic relation in sex differ for that in power relations?

MF: The practice of S/M is the creation of pleasure, and there is an identity with that creation. And that's why S/M is really a subculture. It's a process of invention. S/M is *the use* of a strategic relationship as a source of pleasure (physical pleasure). It is not the first time that people have used strategic relations as a source of pleasure. For instance, in the Middle Ages there was the institution of "courtly love," the troubadour, the institutions of the love relationships between the lady and the lover, and so on. That as well was a strategic game. You even find this between boys and girls when they are dancing on Saturday night. They are acting out strategic relations. What is interesting is that in this heterosexual life those strategic relations come before sex. It's a strategic relation in order to obtain sex. And in S/M those strategic relations are inside sex, as a convention of pleasure within a particular situation.

In the one case the strategic relations are purely social relations, and it is your social being that is involved; while, in the other case, it is your body that is involved. And it is this transfer of strategic relations from the court(ship) to sex that is very interesting.

Q: You mentioned in an interview in *Gai pied* a year or two ago that what upsets people most about gay relations is not so much sexual acts per se but the potential for affectional relationships that are carried on outside the normative patterns. These friendships and networks are unforeseen. Do you think what frightens people is the unknown potential of gay relations, or would you suggest that these relations are seen as posing a direct threat to social institutions?

MF: One thing that interests me now is the problem of friendship. For centuries after antiquity, friendship was a very important kind of social relation: a social relation within which people had a certain freedom, certain kind of choice (limited of course), as well as very intense emotional relations. There were also economic and social implications to these relationships—they were obliged to help their friends, and so on. I think that in the 16th and 17th centuries we see these kinds of friendships disappearing, at least in the male society. And friendship begins to become something other than that. You can find, from the 16th century on, texts that explicitly criticize friendship as something dangerous.

The army, bureaucracy, administration, universities, schools etc.—in the modern senses of these words—cannot function with such intense friendships. I think there can be seen a very strong attempt in all these institutions to diminish, or minimize, the affectional relations. I think this is particularly important in schools. When they started grade schools with hundreds of young boys, one of the problems was how to prevent them, not only from having sex of course, but also from developing friendships. For instance, you could study the strategy of Jesuit institutions about this theme of friendship, since the Jesuits knew very well that it was impossible for them to suppress this. Rather, they tried to use the role of sex, of love, of friendship, and at the same time to limit it. I think now, after studying the history of sex, we should try to understand the history of friendship, or friendships. That history is very, very important.

And one of my hypotheses, which I am sure would be borne out if we did this, is that homosexuality became a problem—that is, sex between men became a problem—in the 18th century. We see the rise of it as a problem with the police, within the justice system, and so on. I think the reason it appears as a problem, as a social issue, at this time is that friendship had disappeared. As long as friendship was something important, was socially accepted, nobody realized men had sex together. You couldn't say that men *didn't* have sex together—it just didn't matter. It had no social implication, it was culturally accepted. Whether they fucked together or kissed had no importance. Absolutely no importance. Once friendship disappeared as a culturally accepted relation, the issue arose, "What is going on between men?" And that's when the problem appears. And if men fuck together, or have sex together, that now appears as a problem. Well, I'm sure I'm right, that the disappearance of friendship as a social relation, and the declaration of homosexuality as a social/political/medical problem, are the same process.

Q: If the important thing now is to explore anew the possibilities of friendships, we should note that, to a large degree, all the social institutions are designed for heterosexual friendships and structures, and the denial of homosexual ones. Isn't the real task to set up new social relations, new value structures, familial structures and so on? One of the things gay people don't have is easy access to all the structures and institutions that go along with monogamy and the nuclear family. What kinds of institutions do we need to begin to establish, in order not only to defend ourselves but also to create new social forms that are really going to be alternative?

MF: Institutions. I have no precise idea. I think, of course, that to use the model of family life, or the institutions of the family, for this purpose and this kind of friendship would be quite contradictory. But it is quite true that since some of the relationships in society are protected forms of family life, an effect of this is that the variations that are not protected are, at the same time, often much richer, more interesting and creative, than the others. But of course, they are much more fragile and vulnerable. The question of what kinds of institutions we need to create is an important and crucial issue, but one that I cannot give an answer to. I think that we have to try to build a solution.

Q: To what degree do we want, or need, the project of gay liberation today to be one that refuses to chart a course and instead insists on opening up new venues? In other words, does your approach to sexual politics deny the need for a program and insist on experimentation with new kind of relations?

MF: I think that one of the great experiences we've had since the last war is that all those social and political programs have been a great failure. We have come to realize things never happen as we expect from a political program; and that a political program has always, or nearly always, led to abuse or political domination from a bloc, be it from technicians or bureaucrats or other people. But one of the development of the '60s and '70s that I think has been a good thing is that certain institutional models have been experimented with without a program. Without a program does not mean blindness—to be blind to thought. For instance, in France there has been a lot of criticism recently about the fact that there are no programs in the various political movements about sex, about prisons, about ecology and so on. But in my opinion, being without a program can be very useful and very original and creative, if it does not mean without proper reflection about what is going on, or without very careful attention to what's possible.

Since the 19th century great political institutions and great political parties have confiscated the process of political creation; that is, they have tried to give to political creation the form of a political program in order to take over power. I think what happened in the '60s and early '70s is something to be preserved. One of the things that I think should be preserved, however, is the fact that there has been political innovation, political creation and political experimentation outside the great political parties, and outside the normal or ordinary program. It's a fact that people's everyday lives have changed from the early '60s to now, and certainly within my own life. And surely, that is not due to political parties but is the result of many movements. These social movements have really changed our whole lives, our mentality, our attitudes and the attitudes and mentality of other people—people who do not belong to these movements. And that is something very important and positive. I repeat, it is not the normal and old traditional political organizations that have led to this examination.

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The Cultural Insularity of Contemporary Music

Michel Foucault: It is often said that contemporary music has gotten "off track"; that it had a singular destiny; that it reached a degree of complexity that renders it inaccessible; that its techniques have dragged it along paths that separate it more and more. However, what strikes me, on the contrary, is the multiplicity of links and relationships between music and all the other elements of culture. This appears in many ways. On one hand, music has been much more sensitive to technological transformations, much more tightly linked to them than most of the other arts (with the exception of cinema, without a doubt). On the other hand, the evolution of these musics since Debussy or Stravinsky presents remarkable correlations with that of painting. And then, the theoretical problems that music itself raised, the way it reflected on its language, its structures, its material, come from an investigation that, I believe, has traversed the entire 20th century: an investigation into "form" which was that of Cezanne or of the cubists, Schonberg's and also of the Russian formalists or the School of Prague. I do not believe that one has to wonder: since music has gone so far off, how can we retrieve it or repatriate it? But rather: since it is so close, so consubstantial to our entire culture, how it is that we feel as if it were projected far away and situated at an almost unattainable distance?

Pierre Boulez: Is the "circuit" of contemporary music so different from the various "circuits" used by symphonic music, chamber, opera, baroque music, all circuits that are so very partitioned off, specialized to the point that one can wonder if there really exists something called general culture? Knowledge gained through records should, in principle, break down these barriers whose economic necessity we can understand, but we observe, on the contrary, that records corroborate both the public's and interpreters' sense of specialization. Even in the organization of a concert or a performance, the forces different types of music call in more or less exclude a common organization, even a polyvalence. Whoever says classical or romantic repertoire implies a standardized education which has a tendency to only include exceptions to this rule if the economy of the whole is not